Mrs. LEMON'S NEIGHBORS

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MRS. LEMON'S NEIGHBORS

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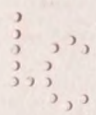
BY

BLOSSOM DRUM OLIPHANT

Author of "A Dog-Day Journal"



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DEDICATED

To the Members of

The Contemporary Club

of

Trenton, New Jersey

In Memory of a Delightful

Afternoon Spent in Their Midst

"In large things—unity;
In small things—liberty;
In all things—charity."

MRS. LEMON'S NEIGHBORS

"What d' you think of 't, Sarah?"

The speaker was a tall, angular woman, long past the prime of life; just such a type as one can find among the poorer element of any unfrequented hamlet of the Middle South, and yet not belonging to that great class known as "poor white trash," where the narrowness of mind appears to warp and starve the body as well. As she paused, a grim smile tried to break through the stern lines of her thin yellow face, resembling nothing so much as the wrinkled back of an old calf-skin binding as the volume lies open, face down, on a table.

"I dun know, but I guess 'twell do, maw," the daughter answered, not permitting her needle to pause in its errand of flying in and out of some coarse, unlovely

cloth. The face of the seamstress was pale and careworn, and the shallow chest and rounded shoulders showed all too plainly the havoc hard work and ill health had wrought on what had once been a robust and merry country girl.

"Would do!" exclaimed the mother, indignant at the lack of enthusiasm shown by her offspring. "Why, Sarah Lemon, I just guess it's 'bout the splendidest thing ez has happened to 'em in a whole parcel o' time." Again the smile deepened the wrinkles of her parchment-like cheeks as she saw in imagination the joy her invitation would create. "Won't it give 'em a s'prise though?"

"'Deed, yes," assented her daughter, the soft Virginia twang making her words blur harmoniously.

"How much you reckon 'twell cost?" Mrs. Lemon inquired anxiously.

"Was you a-thinking o' takin' the men folks?"

"Take the husbands—'deed, no! I does mos' half the wittlelin' o' they families,

an' I ain't agoin' ter pervide fer they pleasures too."

"Well, then, there's Mag an' her two," began the seamstress, dropping her work in her lap and counting off the members of the proposed expedition on her long bony fingers. "An' there's Cinda an' her three," she continued, "an' there's you an' me, an' Bess. That's five grown folks an' five under twelve—but o' course 'tain't likely the train men would count Johnny; an' ez I makes it out, 'twell come ter three dollars, an' that don't take in the sight o' lunch you'll hev ter take fer so many."

"My, my!" exclaimed the old lady excitedly, "I kin jes' see they faces, Sarah, w'en I tells 'em. Why, the childern'll go mos' crazy." With which announcement she betook herself to the kitchen. There Sarah could hear her humming an ancient hymn as she moved among her pots and pans. Suddenly the clatter of a knife falling to the floor changed the music into grumbling.

"Kin I help you, maw?" her daughter called out.

"No, yer can't," was the ungracious reply. "There's them pertaters not peeled yet, an' me ast Bess ter do 'em two good hours ago. 'Pears ter me," she continued shrilly, after giving a sigh, "all that gal thinks on these here days is ridin' straddle o' two wheels, an' berlongin' ter clubs, an' votin'. New woman, she calls it, but I think she'd be a sight better knowin' 'bout bein' a ole woman fust. I wonder she ain't feared she might die 'fore she's quit doin' them ways. It's kinder temptin' Providence, like makin' Adam a helpmate ter Eve, when the Lord 'spressly declared 't should be t'other way 'round." There was silence for a few minutes, then she burst forth once more: "It's a blessed good thing fer Miss Bess her paw ain't a livin'; he'd a settled her an' her idees an' her clothes mighty quick, I tell you, fer he'd hev no such ways, er fool carryin's on, 'bout him, an' that's w'at I kin tell her."

When the day's work was over and the supper dishes had been set away in the spotless dresser, Mrs. Lemon and Sarah sat at the front door of their comfortable home, idly watching the people going and coming from the general utility store on the one street of which the hamlet could boast.

"The gals 'peared ez pleased ez pleased," the old woman averred, referring to the excursion, and she smoothed her apron over her knees before resting her elbows upon them.

"Did they?" Sarah spoke weariedly as she dreamily gazed upward at the skies now throbbing under the spell of a gorgeous afterglow.

"Is you tireder'n mos' times, Sarah?" There was an anxious ring to the mother's voice. "You seem sorter quiet-like ter night."

"Nope," Sarah answered; then added after a second of silence, "but, truth is, maw, that whiles yer went ter see the gals, I kep' a-thinkin' 'bout them Nesbits, an'

a-wishin' I could see my way clare ter take 'em too. They's mighty po'." Sarah paused, for her voice was growing husky with suppressed emotion. "Yer never hears 'em grumblin', but I knows there's a sight of scrimpin' an' savin' done over yonder," she continued, pointing to a cottage across the road. "It's not easy fer 'em ter make bofe ends meet sometimes. But there," she sighed, as she rested her cheek on her clenched hand, "I can't 'ford it, fer I don't get a dime fer sewin' these days, ter where I got a levy two years ago."

"Well, this do beat all!" ejaculated Mrs. Lemon, drawing her spectacles lower on her nose and gazing intently at her daughter over the rim. Never had Sarah been known to speak at such length on any subject, having always been the silent, hard-working member of the family, and expected to coincide with other people's plans. "An' is this what you's ben steddyin' over this mortal afternoon, an' never tole me a word?" queried her

mother. "Now, I takes that right hard on you, Sarah Lemon, right hard, 'deed I does; fer it look's like yer took me ter be mighty mean." To be penurious is one thing, but to know we are considered so is quite another, and no one resents the accusation with greater vehemence than those who are so inclined.

"Well, but, maw," began the younger woman, trying to defend herself and at the same time pacify her irate parent; "but, maw, yer never tole nobody what yer got. I say 'twas sho' five dollars, fer yer kep' a-talkin' 'bout the 'scursion, an' of a gettin' a new caliker fer yo'self besides. Cinda 'lowed ez John say it might be ez much ez ten, but o' course we all knowed that wuz jes' one o' his jokes."

"Look-a-here, Sarah Lemon"—the old lady chuckled as she bent toward her daughter—"don't yer go tattle. Yer won't sho'? Well, then, I'll tell yer right now." Drawing her closer she whispered exultantly in her ear, "Yer ain't none o' yer right; 'twas twenty dollars."

"Lord-a-mercy!" almost screamed her daughter as she anxiously scanned her mother's face to discover if there were visible signs of mental aberration.

"Hush!" cautioned Mrs. Lemon quickly with her index finger on her lips, and looked about to see whether any one had been near enough to hear her child's exclamation. "I never did think much o' stocks," she began by way of explanation, "and was somehow mighty onwillin' w'en Deacon Lynn come an' talked ter me 'bout what I was ter do with the thousand dollars Bowzer 's done give me fer our piece o' farm land, where they built the machines what runs the 'lectric cars. 'Put it in stocks, Miss Lemon,' says he, 'an' you'll never regret it.' But dear me, don't yer know I didn't half a-want to. It jest shows how little folks knows, even when they thinks they knows quite a lot, fer now, my—I wouldn't be without them stocks, an' I think a heap of 'em. You see it's this away," she continued, nodding her head sagely, "all yer has ter do is ter give

'em yer money, an' they give you a big piece of paper with writin' an' printin' on 't, then you sets down and waits fer a spell, an' pretty soon they sends you what you calls a divide-end, an' that means twenty dollars fer me every six months. Course I kin get my money ag'in when I wants ter. But you was a-talkin' 'bout them Nesbit gals—what's it yer want done?" she asked as she settled back against the door-jamb.

"I was jest a-wishin' they could go 'long," Sarah replied, "but I didn't like ter press it, knowin' yer was right pinched yerself las' year."

"I'm mighty glad yer tole me," Mrs. Lemon assured her heartily. "'Cept fer the dollar fer they tickets, 'twon't cost nothin', fer they eats like birds, an' they don't seem the kind ez cares fer razzle-dazzles, ferrisses, shoot-the-shoots, an' the like. Why, they won't be no sort o' trouble." She now began to warm to her subject, and would soon declare that the idea had originated in her own active

brain. Before Sarah could express her appreciation, she added, as she rose to her feet and shook out her calico wrapper, "I'll jes' slip 'cross this minute an' see 'bout it, fer they be the politenest folks I ever met with an' they won't be a trouble at all." On reaching her garden gate she retraced her steps, and whispered mysteriously, "Don't yer let on 'bout what I tole yer, fer if yer do, Bess 'll sure want a new wheel, an' Mag's Fred 'll be fer borrowin' it offen me fer his new hencoop." Not waiting for an answer, she again turned toward the roadway, muttering as she went, "It don't always do ter let folks know yer too almighty rich; but Sarah's different somehow—she's safe."

"Good-evenin', Miss Ruthie," she said aloud the next moment as she entered the gate directly opposite her own and addressed a young girl who was bending over a small and well-kept plat of flowers; "I hopes you and yer sister's tol'able well ter-day."

"I am very well and Mary is about as usual, thank you." Ruth Nesbit made a beautiful picture, in the half light, as she rose from her work, a diminutive garden spade in one hand and a watering pot in the other. The smile of welcome that lighted her countenance seemed to be playing a game of hide-and-seek among the dimples about her mouth and sparkling blue eyes. The setting sun appeared to have forgotten to take all of his glorious color and brightness when he sank behind the Virginia hills, for piled above her snowy brow was a soft mass of golden hair, in direct contrast to the dark eyebrows and lashes that enhanced her beauty a hundred-fold. She was neither plump nor thin, of medium height, and graceful in every movement. The easy tread with which she came toward her visitor showed that by birth and education she had been intended for some higher sphere than the one she occupied at present. After a cordial greeting she led the way to the tiny cottage, whose door

opened directly into the living-room. It was but a cramped abode of four rooms. The kitchen was at the rear of the sitting-room, with a narrow stairway between leading to the two chambers above. One could scarcely have imagined a more barren and unattractive place of residence when the sisters first moved into the house, yet in two years it had become a delightful and cozy habitation; for Ruth, by her ready tact and kindliness of disposition, had soon won the hearts of her pupils and their parents, and before long they had become her staunch friends. This was proved in many ways, especially in their help and interest during the extreme illness of her elder sister soon after their arrival.

Shortly after they were established in Mount Sion the men of the community gave the young teacher a surprise by erecting what Elder Jones referred to in his address of presentation as "a real neat-lookin' Queen Annie porch with a lot of nick-nacks 'round 'bout it fer prettiness,

an' 'nough room atop ter set some few cheers an' things house-cleanin' times." The women, not to be outdone by the sterner sex, hearing from the children that the sisters were fond of flowers, gave liberally of their slips and seeds, so that from early spring to late autumn the cottage had the appearance of a bower, nestled as it was among the vines and shrubs.

"Mary, here is Mrs. Lemon," the girl called cheerily as she opened the door, her clear voice seeming to penetrate every corner of the room, and yet leaving no jarring sound on the listener's ear.

"How kind of you to come." And the speaker, a woman of some thirty summers, advanced to meet her guest. "I was beginning to wish that this little sister of mine would come indoors, for I have been gradually losing myself in a fit of the blues." Hers was another charming voice, but deeper and more vibrating. It was as the difference to be heard between two bells, both of fine tone; the one tinkling out its joyous silvery

song, the other as a sound from a cathedral tower that wafts its deep, soft note across the fields at the twilight hour.

"Yer don't say so." And Mrs. Lemon peered at Mary Nesbit through the gathering gloom. "'Pears ter me yer two's always so busy an' cheerful like, yer never'd hev time fer them kind o' fits; mebbe so 'tis ez well I come ter-night arter all."

The lamp had been lighted while the visitor was speaking, showing a room simply furnished, but over which there had presided a touch of refinement and taste that transformed the humbler surroundings into a bright, attractive apartment. Their neighbors felt the difference between this and their best rooms, and sought to secure the same result, but try as they might, they succeeded in but poor imitations. And yet, save for a desk, a table, and an arm-chair of fine old mahogany, which was all they had left of happier days, the furniture was no better than that in any of the homes about them.

Ruth had been the wage-earner of the household for many months, as well as the beloved darling and pride of the elder sister. But the queen of the home was Mary. She was tall and slender, but too well proportioned to make either her height or slightness detract from her appearance. Her complexion was that of a lily, only relieved by the intense carmine of her beautiful lips. Her eyes were shadowy depths of brown, which harmonized to perfection with the heavy plaits of true chestnut hair which crowned her shapely head. A casual observer would not have fancied that for years she had been haunted by pain and anxiety, but closer scrutiny would quickly show in the exquisite contour and expression of her face the imprint of the martyr, and the blessing affliction can bestow on the countenance of those, who not only endure, but also willingly bear their crosses with the strength that comes through patience. Something there was in her face that made men instinctively gentle and considerate

in her presence, and caused all women to want her for a friend. The village children loved her, and were never happier than when she permitted them to be her companions for a walk, or gather about, their eyes wide with wonder, as they listened to some of the marvelous tales she could tell. In Mary, Ruth found a mother as well as sister, a counsellor as well as friend; joining in all the pleasures and disappointments of their quiet home, and smoothing many a rugged step in the young girl's path in life. If Tommy would not learn his lessons, or Ike had played truant, or Matilda Jane had told a fib, sister Mary knew how to quiet the anxious mind of the little teacher. An apparently accidental meeting with the unruly boy or girl, a few calm, wise and loving words to them on the subject near her heart, had invariably the desired effect and next day the refractory scholar would be in an angelic frame of mind.

The sisters were always delighted to welcome Mrs. Lemon, and the old lady,

like most of the daughters of Earth, thoroughly enjoyed being made a fuss over. Her visits would always begin with sundry questions regarding their household affairs, the cost of provisions, the growth of their flowers, the state of the weather, and various matters of interest taking place among their neighbors. To-night was no exception to the usual order of topics, but when these had been sufficiently discussed to her satisfaction, she cleared her throat, resettled herself in her chair, and began to speak in a manner at once mysterious and important.

"I reckon yer's both a-wonderin' what's bringin' me here so soon ag'in, fer if yer 'members I was over jes' las' Saturday gone by; but truth is there's suthin' on my mind fer quite a spell back, an' I reckoned I bes' come over, fer I says ter Sarah, I says, you'd take what's ter be said better from me than from mos', seein' ez how I'm 'bout yer bes' an' oldes' friend, ez yer might say, in this ere town, since fust yer come; so I says ter Sarah, 'I'll jes' step

right 'cross this very evenin' an' see them gals 'fore they comes ter hear it from other folks, an' see what they's ter say 'bout it, an' let 'em know my reason fer thinkin' it's bes' they'd go way fer a spell.'" As she concluded, her hearers' hearts beat fast, and every imaginable evil that could befall them surged through their brains.

"Oh! what can it mean? What have I left undone? I have tried so hard," inwardly groaned little Ruth, as with blanched and trembling lips, and with fingers rigidly interlaced, she waited breathlessly to hear the sounding of her doom, her dismissal from the school pronounced.

"It has come," thought the elder sister, with a calmness born of despair, as she drew a quivering breath. "It was too good to last, but at least it has been a peaceful home to us for two years."

"Yer see it's this away," their visitor continued in a brisker tone, as she slowly smoothed one hand over the other: "We o' Mount Sion Church gives a picnic every

year, an' we's ter have our'n nex' week; but the picnic's turned ter a 'scursion this time. Folks from other 'ligions kin go, an' I mus' say they turns out real well, so me an' Sarah's goin' ter invite yer two ter go long o' us, an'—"

"Oh!" Ruth gave a half sob.

"Law sakes, what's a matter?" exclaimed the old lady in a voice full of concern.

"Nothing, nothing, dear Mrs. Lemon," hurriedly explained the girl, trying to hide her agitation. "It was only a slight pain which has now quite passed."

"Dearie me, does she git 'em often?" the visitor inquired anxiously of Mary. The latter shook her head in reply, and being convinced the ailment was nothing serious, Mrs. Lemon resumed her discourse. "Well, ez I was sayin', I'm agoin' ter take the fambly ter the 'scursion an' thought mebbe so yer'd both go 'long. They say they's heap grander places, but I ain't seen 'em, an' yer kin hev' 'bout ez good times at Bay Ridge fer the money ez ever I see, er keer ter see, an' ez yer ain't

never gone nowhere in two year, not even ter the city, 'cept two er mebbe three times, I think it would shake yer up a bit ter go 'long o' us."

"Indeed, we will be your guests with the greatest pleasure," Mary assured her, laying her shapely white hand over the widow's work-worn fingers and giving them a kindly pressure. Her eyes had become misty, so touched was she by her neighbor's thoughtfulness. "I am quite sure we will enjoy the trip thoroughly," she added, "and that it will brighten our rather burdensome existence greatly."

"Ah, to think of breathing salt air once more!" cried Ruth joyfully, already forgetting her recent alarm and eager to enter into the preparations for the unexpected frolic.

"Yer jes' wait 'twell yer see the place," Mrs. Lemon said, delighted to find that her invitation was so fully appreciated. "They's lots o' things ter see an' do. The bathin' 's gran', they says. Not ez I ever tried it myself, not holdin' ter the notion

o' men and women-folks philanderin' around in the water tergether with next ter no clothes on, ez yer might say. But there,"—she drew a long breath,—"people has sech a lot o' different notions in the world, don't they? Now there was paw—Mr. Lemon, I mean, my husban' what's dead—he was that set ag'in' promiscu's bathin', as it's called, that when Goldens come an' built they big fine house by the river on the road ter town, he al'ays made the gals an' me pull down the wagon blinds on the water side, fer he said it wa'n't no sight fer decent church folk ter see." She raised both her hands and shook her head solemnly, as if what might have been beheld was past describing. "Men is queer though, an' they's more 'n one kind in the worl', fer my brother allers say he'd take any man's wife, daughter, sister, an' even mother a-swimmin', what would let him, but he wanted the male sex ter understand his women-folks was ter be lef' alone." She gave an amused chuckle before continuing: "Yer wait till yer go

on that 'scursion, fer yer'll see some mighty quare sights. Why, Deacon Lynn and Elder Jones, so solemn ez they be on dry lan', is like friskin' puppies when the water a-touches 'em. They's a flounderin' around an' duckin' all the womens they kin ketch, an' sech sights as they be theyselves. Yer don't know which is ugliest, the males er the females. It makes yer kinder think on Joseph an' his dreams, fer it's there yer kin see both the fat an' the lean kind." As she became interested in what she was recounting she had slipped more and more into the dialect of her class. "Well, I reckon' I'll be agoin' now," she concluded as she rose slowly from the mahogany chair, "I'm real pleased yer'll both go 'long."

Ruth accompanied her to her gate, for it was now quite dark. As she bid Mrs. Lemon good-night she impulsively threw her arms about her, kissed her on both cheeks, then with a merry laugh ran swiftly across the dusty road.

"Well, whatever come over that gal anyhow, I wonder. She never any more 'n shook han's, er said thank yer afore; not even fer the chicken er custard pie we sent 'em Christmas times," the old woman pondered as she passed her hand gently over the spot where the soft lips had pressed. "Well, I'm glad I asked 'em all same. They won't be no manner o' trouble an' don't eat no more 'n mice.— Yes, Sarah, it's me; I'm a comin'."

The day of the excursion finally arrived, and the early morning cars running from Mount Sion to Washington were so crowded with happy and good-natured Mount Sionites that many had to stand all the way to town. Deacon Lynn declared he "didn't reckon six men had ben lef' fer ter keer fer the chickens." After a ride of an hour and a half through the country and city, there was a rush and a crush on reaching the railroad station. Here endless laughter, good-natured chaff, and packing away into small spaces of

lunch baskets and boxes, as well as grown people and children, took place before all were settled for the two hours' journey ahead of them. The two sisters sat together back of the Lemon party, quietly amused at the various phases of life to be seen about them. They had never been on just such a trip, and found it wonderfully amusing to watch the faces and manners of their fellow-travelers.

At the end of a half hour the younger members of their party became restive, and at Mary's suggestion Ruth opened a large box of caramels, which they had made the night before, and handed them around. Sarah sat apart from the family, crowded into a seat with a large basket and an obstreperous nephew. By her the young teacher remained for some time before returning to her place. A gentleman on the opposite side of the car glanced toward her as she passed, at first in casual curiosity, then in surprised recognition. A few moments later he rose, went to the door, where he leaned, and at his leisure

watched her and her companion intently, then walked rapidly down the aisle in their direction. The peculiar mesmeric influence that takes place when a stronger nature looks directly at one more easily governed, caused Ruth at that moment to raise her eyes, and thus brought him within her line of vision. With a slight exclamation she half rose to her feet as he gained her side.

"I hope Miss Nesbit has not forgotten me."

"No, indeed, Mr. Brice," came the prompt reply as her face lighted up under dimpling smiles. "I hardly expected to see you here, however," she added.

"Jove! what a little beauty she has become," was his silent comment, while aloud he assured her: "You have changed but little; I should have known you anywhere. And where do you reside, if I may be permitted to inquire?"

"With my sister," she answered. "Mary, you remember the son of papa's old friend, Colonel Brice?"

"I remember the Colonel very well," said Mary, turning her beautiful face toward the young man, "and if I am not mistaken this is the small boy named Leonard, grown to man's estate." As their hands clasped she added, "How pleasant it is to meet an old friend once again."

Then followed questions and answers in rapid succession, and before long he had learned all that had befallen the sisters during the past eight years.

Mrs. Lemon, sitting directly in front, drank in every word as young Brice bent over the back of her seat to converse with his friends.

"I 'clar', 'twere ez good ez any story-book," she confided later on to Sarah. "The way o' 't was so: Seems the young man's paw's in the Army, and had ter go way off somewhere,"—waving her hand vaguely about her head,—" 'spect 'twas ter fight Injuns; anyhow, arter he'd gone these gals' paw he died suddint like. He was a Navy chap. Arter that they'd times

an' times. Fust they gives up they home an' furniture, but that didn't do no good ontil some friends got writin' work for Mary ter do. Then bad 'nough not havin' come, they maw sets down an' takes sick an' keeps sick, an' don't get no better. That's how things went fer a spell, an' then they maw she dies, but it didn't do 'em no kind o' good, fer Miss Mary she done wore herself out so complete a writin' all day' an' a nussin' all night, that when she see she ain't needed no more, she turns to an' has a spell o' sickness. Then it was Ruthie's turn to earn the money, an' she comes here ter Mount Sion ter teach."

Ruth had finished her narrative with an account of her life in the quiet village and her work in the district school, saying in conclusion:

"It isn't a very thrilling tale, Mr. Brice, to one who, like yourself, has been at the seat of war. Now, be kind and tell Mary and me of your wanderings."

He did not answer her directly, for he had been more touched by the girl's story than he cared to show. How well he remembered them in the days of their prosperity.

"You no doubt think I should be able to give you glowing accounts of how the last few years have served me, but truth impels me to acknowledge that I was always just too late to be of any use in the scrapping matches during the late unpleasantness between Spain and ourselves."

"It is a pity, of course, for your sake, but it must be confessed it is rather refreshing to hear of at least one man who does not claim that the brunt of battle did not rest unaided on his shoulders," Mary remarked; then asked, "Where are you stationed at present?"

"In Washington; I am only just home from Manila—you know I follow the sea." The next moment he gave an impatient exclamation as the train stopped before a small station. "Here we are at Annapolis

Junction. It is too vexing to have to leave you so soon, but on my return to Washington, with your permission, I intend making a pilgrimage to Mount Sion." With more regret than he had expected to experience, he took leave of the sisters and jumped from the platform just as the train got under way.

Great was the excitement of the Mount Sionites over the chance encounter. The young girls would have liked nothing better than to meet the handsome stranger. Their elders frowned upon any such idea, but they nevertheless kept up a telegraphic system of nods and smiles to show how affairs were progressing.

The day at Bay Ridge proved to be all that could be desired. The expanse of blue water might have been an immense aqua marine, by turns smooth and clear, and the next moment dancing in the sunlight. A fine breeze blew up from the ocean, and each whiff of the briny air was like new life to the sisters who had been inland for so many years. The lunch was

declared "jes' a gran' success," by Deacon Lynn, in a famous after-dinner speech delivered on the broad piazza of the pavilion, "from Mary Ellen Jones's apple jelly, ter Susan Crank's home-cured ham; an' ez fer Miss Lemon, she's done outdid herself on them sliced green apple pies." Each mode of entertainment was tried, everything was enjoyed, every one was happy, and a very contented, if weary, party returned to Mount Sion late that night.

"Maw—Sarah—look quick! I was mos' sure he'd come ter-day." Bess turned again to the window as she spoke.

"Hush, Bess! My soul, don't let the man hear yer," expostulated Sarah, as she adjusted the slats of the shutter so she could have an unbroken view of the broad shoulders that seemed to fill up the greater part of the opening of "Queen Annie's porch."

"My law, has he come? Let's see him," panted Mrs. Lemon, running with a limp

and a hop from her kitchen and pushing her youngest daughter unceremoniously aside, while she took her place at the shutter. "Yes, ma'am," she chuckled, "I felt mos' sure he would."

"Would what?" asked Bess crossly, trying to find another place from which to watch the cottage across the road.

"Have on another pair o' pants," murmured her mother. "He's had on clean white pants every time he's come, an' I reckon these is his bes', fer they's slicker 'n nothin'. Lan's sakes, he mus' have a washin' enough fer a hull fambly jes' fer hisself alone." As the unconscious subject of all this speculation was admitted to the cottage the old woman exclaimed pettishly: "Why can't Ruthie ever meet him? I never sees 'em tergether, an' yet I seen him each time he's come these six weeks."

July had slipped by and half of August was flitting into the past. The villagers were becoming almost accustomed to the comings and goings of the young naval

officer to the little home on the hillside. After the murky heat of the town it was refreshing to saunter across the Aqueduct Bridge in the cool of the day and, boarding a car, pass rapidly through the glades and on to the Virginia hills beyond, and gaze down on that ever-beautiful view of Washington, bathed in the glowing crimson and gold of the sunset, or as a phantom city in the clear cold light of the moon. Thither he now constantly bent his steps, but no longer to view the landscape o'er. The light of welcome in a pair of blue eyes fully repaid him for the length of his trips and proved more fascinating than the beauties of nature.

In these few weeks his friendship and admiration for Ruth had deepened into a warm and lasting affection. In former days he had been a bonny, kind-hearted boy, and Ruth a tiny, timid child, but there had been too great a disparity of age for them to be comrades, although the fact that their parents were friends and

neighbors threw them more or less together. Once, when returning from school, he had come upon the child being tormented by some ill-looking rowdies. Seeing Ruth in tears, he threw himself upon the evident leader of the gang, and after thrashing him soundly, he straightened his necktie, picked up his hat, and slipping his hand through the little girl's arm, led her home with the air of a youth who liked nothing better than to finish off any number of toughs. From that hour he had become Ruth's hero, and she was his warm friend. Not long after this Colonel Brice was ordered to the Pacific coast, and on Commander Nesbit's death her life was completely changed. The sisters had heard but rarely from their friends, many of whom were in distant cities, and of Leonard they knew nothing at all.

Being now stationed in Washington, Brice found it both easy and pleasant to renew his former friendship with Mary

and Ruth, but before a fortnight had passed he thought the day a gloomy one that had kept him away from the fair little teacher. To-night he had taken supper with them, and as he left the tiny home a happy light shone in his steadfast gray eyes as he called a last good-night from the gateway to the white-robed figure standing on the porch; then with a wave of his hand he started down the road at a swinging pace, whistling merrily as he went in the darkness.

"He didn't ever do 't afore, Sarah, did he?" Mrs. Lemon raised her head and listened intently.

"Not ez I knows on, maw," answered the patient daughter as she sewed buttons on a waist.

"Humph!" mused the old lady, folding up her work preparatory to retiring for the night, "he's beginnin' ter take notice, sho' nuff; a heap o' notice. I think's we'll hear some news 'fore long at this rate; I'd bet somethin' pretty, we will."

"Mount Sion, Va., August 15, 1900.

"My Dear Captain Lisle:

"I wonder if you remember a promise you made me the last time I saw you, seven years ago. The compact ran as follows: Should you be the very first person invited to my wedding, you agreed to be present and dance with me on that happy occasion. I am now living up to my part of the bargain, and am keeping my letter to you a secret, for not even dear old Mary knows a word of it, or has any idea to whom I am writing.

"I am to be married just one month from to-day, and do hope you can be a witness of the ceremony. It is asking a great deal, that you should come all the way from Kansas because of a promise to a child, but do come anyhow.

"My fiancee is Leonard Brice, the son of your former Colonel. Of course I think him quite the nicest man in the

world. He is in the navy, and—well, yes—I love him dearly.

"Very sincerely your friend,

"RUTH NESBIT.

"P. S.—The wedding is to be very quiet, only Leonard's parents are to be asked."

"Fort ——, Kansas, August 23, 1900.

"My Dear Child:

"You cannot understand with what pleasure I read of your approaching marriage, in your letter which has only just been received, owing to my absence from the post. I have already applied for leave and hope to receive it in time for me to be with you on September 15. As you have not told Miss Mary of your having written to me, suppose we keep up the joke and give her a surprise. If you agree to this, let Leonard know of it, and ask him, as the wedding is to be a family affair, to allow me, for old acquaintance sake, to be his best man.

"With earnest wishes for your happiness, I remain,

"Yours faithfully,

"GEORGE LISLE."

The thought of a trousseau was at once a delight and torment to Ruth, and many and long were the discussions in the small home as to ways and means. There was little money available for the purchase of even the most modest outfit. It was finally decided that but one dress could be bought, and a few days later the young teacher went to town on a shopping expedition, returning in a very happy frame of mind, with arms loaded with bundles, and hardly able to stand on her aching feet.

That evening as the sisters sat together in the twilight, Ruth asked (from her position on the floor at Mary's side) whether she should wear the green cloth dress when she was married, or do up her old white lawn that Leonard admired.

"Your new dress will be very serviceable to you, dear, but your wedding gown should be white satin."

"How can you be so absurd!" Ruth exclaimed half petulantly. "You know it was only by your giving up getting a new winter dress that I could afford the blue wrapper." Distress and disappointment were to be heard in her voice. It was something new for her sister to fail to understand her.

"I did not intend you to purchase it, my darling," and Mary bent over and drew the girl, who had drawn away from her, into a close embrace. "Long ago," she continued,—"oh! in looking backward, little sister, it seems a century ago,—before our trouble came, I—I was engaged." Ruth could hardly believe she heard the last words aright. "He was a very noble man, dear child." Mary's voice had grown husky. "Our marriage was to take place in a short time. No one save my parents knew of our betrothal, not even my little sister,

for my lover was in the far West and it was doubtful when he could come to claim me. One day we received word that he would reach Washington in two weeks' time and asked if I would marry him the day after he arrived. There was a hurried consultation and then dear papa wired that things should be as he desired. How well I recall the bustle that ensued; it was on that day the white satin was bought for my wedding gown. You knew nothing of all this, for you only returned home from your visit to the Grahams two days later, when papa died. You can remember how shocking it was to find ourselves almost destitute and that it was then I became the bread-winner of the family. When my lover arrived he begged of me to marry him immediately and permit him to give mother and you a home; but he was a poor man, Ruth, and because of the very intensity of my love I could not, and would not, lay the burden of my anxieties and cares upon his shoulders; so I told him that as long

as mama and you needed me, I would never be his wife. He would not consent to our engagement being broken at first, but a year later I sent him my simple little ring, and told him he was as free as I should consider myself to be from that hour."

Mary's voice broke, and for a few minutes it seemed as if she would be unable to continue. Ruth was frightened at the intensity of her grief, and clung to her in silence.

"Only God knows what those first years were, but thanks to His mercy, although I have never ceased to love him, and long for him every hour I live, I have in part conquered self, and am now at last at peace. So you must wear my satin dress, little sister—it shall be my wedding gift to you." Bending her beautiful face, she kissed the soft round cheek, and then swiftly left the room.

Who would have thought of such a thing? Who could the man have been? Ruth pondered, but she could recall no

one in particular, for in those old days there had always been a number of admirers about her sister. It is true that she had been very young at the time, but she felt sure that had she ever seen Mary's lover she would have understood somewhat of the situation.

"Never mind," thought the girl as she tossed wakefully on her little bed, "she shall tell me about it in the morning." But in this she was mistaken, for when she asked for information the next day, Mary begged of her never to refer to the subject again.

"Run away like a good child," she urged, "and allow your old-maid sister to attend to her work. But wait a moment," she added, seeing Ruth turn away reluctantly, "why not take the materials for both your dresses over to Sarah, and engage her to make them for you at once." She opened the drawer of her bureau as she spoke, drew forth a roll, done up in many wrappings of linen and

tissue paper, and thrusting it into her sister's hand abruptly turned away.

Ruth took her advice, and for the next two hours was engrossed with the seamstress, over fashion plates, while in the small bed-room she had left knelt a lonely woman, heart-wringing sobs bursting from her lips, try as she would to check them, and the pent-up agony of seven long years of renunciation tearing apart the iron bonds of will which had controlled her thus far.

"Maw, is yer there?" Sarah whispered mysteriously as Ruth closed the house door.

"Yep, I heerd mos' she say," came the equally guarded answer, and Mrs. Lemon emerged from her kitchen with expectancy writ large upon her sallow countenance. "Not ter say ez I was list'in', fer I wa'n't; but ez I made up them apple pies I ketched a word here an' there."

While her mother was speaking, Sarah untied one of the bundles, disclosing the

shining folds of satin, seeing which the old woman threw up her hands in astonishment, caught her breath and finally exclaimed:

"My soul! Well now, I 'clare, ain't that gran'!" Wiping her already clean hands on her spotless white apron, she readjusted her spectacles and took up a corner of the material; passing her fingers over it at first gingerly, then caressingly, and in the end fringed out a few threads as she muttered:

"Sarah Lemon, ez I lives it's silk, silk both ways the hull way th'oo."

"She say Miss Mary give it ter her fer a wedding present an' wants me ter make her trowso." Sarah volunteered the information with a certain quiet elation, both in voice and manner.

"Sarah," said Mrs. Lemon in a business tone, with her hands on her hips and her head held high, "ye've handled 'bout ez good dress goods ez ever was see in this village, fer some ten year back; now,

hones', tell me what yer 'spec that there cos'."

"'Deed ef I knows," the younger woman replied; "but the satin Mary Ellen bought when she married Elder Jones was linen one way, an' I know it cos' at least a dollar, an' I reckon this cos' a sight more."

"Well, it ain't a mite too good fer her, but where yer spose she got the money ter buy it?"

"Mebbe so 'twas bought when they was rich, an' she never got no chance ter wear it." A dreamy expression stole over the speaker's face. Long ago she too had loved and lost, and she surmised more than she was willing to tell of the history of that white satin gown.

Soon the whole village knew of the glories reposing beneath the Lemon's rooftree. Who would be invited to the wedding was now the important topic of conversation in every family. Never in the course of Sarah's existence had she been so popular or received so much

attention, and her whole family shared in her celebrity. Every one wanted to know how the dresses were to be made, and for a fortnight before they were completed the house was besieged with visitors. Even Bess, the irrepressible new woman, found she had sufficient of the old leaven in her composition to be willing to bind seams and fell bands, so as to see and hear all that was taking place.

The day the dresses were completed every female above a dozen years came to inspect them. Sarah was seated in the parlor, with one of the best double sheets spread on the floor beneath her chair, and herself enveloped in its mate, as she put the last stitches to the dainty white gown.

"If it ben me I'd not hed it so plain-like," commented Mary Ellen Jones.

"Ain't it ter have no trimmin'?" inquired an interested spectator.

"Well," explained the seamstress, to whom the simplicity had been a sore trial, "she 'lows she's goin' ter have a frill o' lace at the neck an' sleeves, an' a jay-bow

down the front o' the basque; but it's ole lace," she added, with a sigh. "I reckon they can't well 'ford ter get any that's new."

"I seen it, an' 'tain't so bad," interposed Mrs. Lemon. "It 'longed ter they maw, an' it do look a trifle yaller, but 'tain't so bad. Miss Mary she called it by some Frenchified name, so I made out it must a come from some town in Yomp Point Delancy, I think she say was the name o' the place, but anyhow 'twas made in the furran countries." And after that announcement there was no other topic of conversation at any supper table in Mount Sion that night.

Truly, if "happy is the bride that the sun shines on," Ruth Nesbit's future was to be a bright one, for the fifteenth of September dawned a most glorious day.

Captain Lisle had sent her word that he would arrive in time for the ceremony and urged her to keep his coming a secret

from Colonel and Mrs. Brice as well as Mary.

The wedding gown had been brought home and was lying on the bed waiting to be donned by the little bride, while in the next room Mary's best dress, a rusty and much-mended black cloth, lay across a chair, well brushed, and with fresh ruffles in the neck and sleeves. It was too shiny perhaps in the seams and darned beneath the arms, but alas, a dress, no matter of what material, will wear out eventually, be its intentions never so good.

After an early dinner Ruth went to bid farewell to one of her former pupils who was ill, leaving Mary to complete the floral decorations indoors. The latter had just finished her task, and was placing a large bowl of golden-rod on the mantel when she heard a step on the gravel path. Taking it for granted her sister had returned for the sunshade that was lying forgotten on the chair, she called out, without turning her head:

L. of C.

"Come in, dear, I was waiting for you."

"Were you?" asked a deep voice not in the least like Ruth's, and before she could move she was closely clasped in George Lisle's arms. "Ah, Mary, say it again," he pleaded, as he kissed her passionately on eyes and lips. "I know you did not think it was I when you spoke, but now you know I am here, repeat it, as we stand heart to heart once more. Dear love, if you but knew how I have hungered for a sight of your dear face and the sound of your sweet voice, you would not have bid me stay away so long. At last Ruth wrote to me she was to marry Leonard Brice and I knew there could no longer be any obstacle to our marriage, and I've come for my bride. What has my loved one to say to that?" he asked, as he released her, with a laugh that had a queer little catch of emotion in it.

Happy tears stood in Mary's eyes as she looked up at the tall man who was patiently waiting for her answer. Her

lips quivered, and it was with difficulty that she controlled herself.

"I do not think I ought to marry you, dear," she said, "for I am no longer young. Thirty may not seem old to most women, but it means old with me. Dear George, do not be angry, try to understand. I am not the strong, self-reliant girl you knew eight years ago, but a weak and broken woman—who—"

"Mary," interrupted Captain Lisle, "you were never half so dear to me in those old days as you are this moment." Taking her hands, he continued: "You say you are no longer young. Well, if the truth is to be told, neither am I. If you are thirty, I am forty. Here is a bargain, sweetheart. If you will look out for me when I have rheumatism, I will take care of you when—"

"Be reasonable," she interrupted in her turn; but taking her face between his hands, he gazed earnestly into the depths of her clear brown eyes, and continued as if she had not spoken:

"Long ago you gave yourself to me. Until now I have allowed you to have your own sweet will in all things, because you thought you would be happier. But from this moment I intend instituting a new management, and so, Miss Mary"—he was smiling now—"I give you fair warning to 'but me no buts,' for I'll not listen." While the speech was masterful, he raised her hands to his lips and kissed them reverently. He understood and loved his Mary so well.

After this they talked quietly together until they saw Ruth returning down the road, when he went to meet her, and give Mary an opportunity for a few quiet moments to herself, for it had been arranged that they would not confide their plans for the future to any one until after Ruth's marriage.

George Lisle was the soul of wit and humor among his fellows, and now he exerted himself two-fold in his effort to entertain the bride-elect and thus shield

his sweetheart's unusually happy face from her bright eyes.

"It is high time for us to be dressing!" the little teacher suddenly exclaimed, and darted from the room and up the stairs. As Mary was about to follow, Lisle detained her, and drawing a ring from his pocket slipped it onto her third finger.

"Oh, indeed, indeed, you should not have bought this!" she cried, as a large sapphire surrounded by diamonds flashed into view, adding hesitatingly, "you know you cannot afford such gifts."

"Oh, prudent Mary, and how does it come that my lady understands the condition of our exchequer so well?" His question caused a slight flush to overspread her face, making her more like the winsome girl he had loved in the old days. "You may rest assured I stood too much in awe of you to venture on such an expenditure unless I felt I could afford it. You see you had to have an engagement ring," he said in explanation as he caught her to his breast, "and our

old one had been on my finger so long I would feel lost without it."

"I feel as if this happiness could not be for me," she whispered as her head rested on his shoulder. "I have been so tired, dear, for such a long, long time."

"But happiness is for you, my own; please God both for you and for me!" he murmured as he tenderly smoothed the soft hair from her brow. When she would have left him he handed her a box, evidently from a florist, while he said: "I pray you to adorn yourself with these old favorites of mine, dear lady, for you must look as well as Ruth to-night."

Never to be forgotten among the inhabitants of Mount Sion was Ruth Nesbit's wedding. With the first peep of the birds the village was astir. For a week, in every home, there had been mending, patching and cleaning of garments to be worn on that occasion, for they were all to go, men, women and

children, and for the once all envyings and heart-burnings were at peace.

The making of the two dresses for the bride had been a wonderful advertisement for Sarah. Orders were already on hand that would keep her busy far into the following spring, and knowing the cause of her renewed popularity, she added that morning, as she knelt in prayer, "An' bless 'em, O Lord, them two dear gals 'cross the road; an' may the good they've done fer me, return ter 'em a hundred-fold."

Mrs. Lemon was dressed in her best early in the afternoon, and while caring for several of her grandchildren in her "best room," had the advantage of seeing every one who went in or out of her neighbors' house.

When the carriage arrived containing the groom and his parents, the excitement in the village ran high, and Mrs. Lemon became so agitated at the sight of the uniforms and brass buttons that her new cap twisted quite awry, and she

would never have known of it but for Bess.

Mary's deft fingers had converted the kitchen into a second sitting-room. The fireless stove was covered with a white cloth, on which rested a huge wedding-cake, the gift of the Lemon family. The deal table had become a thing of beauty under its load of flowers and large pitchers of lemonade. While white curtains at the window, a bright rug on the floor, and masses of golden-rod wherever it could be placed, changed the appearance of the room completely. Even with this addition, however, the crowd was great, and but for "Queen Annie's" porch might have been uncomfortable.

The first of the bridal party to enter the room were Colonel and Mrs. Brice, followed by Leonard and Captain Lisle. A moment later Mary descended the stairway, and with Ruth leaning on her arm slowly crossed the room to the window, draped in a curtain of ferns and the bright yellow flowers, where the clergy-

man awaited them. It would have been difficult to say which of these two women was the more beautiful; Mary, in her old black dress, whose only adornment was masses of blush roses on her breast and at her belt, or little Ruth, with the heavy folds of satin falling about her dainty figure and carrying a huge bouquet.

On relinquishing her sister's hand Mary realized how lonely she might have been but for the great happiness that had come into her life, and as she raised her eyes and glanced across the intervening space she found those eyes gazing upon her with an expression of ineffable and satisfied love. A trembling smile stole over her lips, and from that moment a great peace overshadowed her heart.

How quickly the words were pronounced that made the two young people man and wife. The clergyman, Mr. Walford, was congratulating them before the service seemed fairly begun.

Scarcely waiting for the old gentleman to finish his rather ponderous speech,

Captain Lisle stepped forward, saying as he took Mary's hand in his:

"Mr. Walford, as I secured a license before coming to Mount Sion, will you be good enough to repeat the marriage ceremony?"

A ripple of suppressed exclamations could be heard through the rooms, quickly hushed, as the minister began immediately:

"Dearly beloved brethren—"

How strong was the clasp of Lisle's hand on hers, how steady his voice as he vowed to protect his Mary; but her voice had a ring of truth and love that sounded the heartstrings of all her friends as she plighted her troth to the man whom she had loved through seven years of faithful waiting.

"Oh, Mary, dear Mary, to think I never suspected who it was!" cried Ruth as she flung her arms about her sister. "How glad I am now that I wrote that letter," she added, turning to the Captain.

"No reprieve to a prisoner was ever more welcome than it was to me, my child," he answered as he kissed her brow, "for Mary told me that until you were in a home of your own she would never again listen to me."

"Well, I de-clar'!" ejaculated Elder Jones as he slapped his thigh a thunderous whack. "Did you ever hear o' sech doin's hereabouts?"

"It do beat all," Deacon Lynn confided to a friend, as he pulled his long gray goatee thoughtfully, "how some folks kin keep things to theyselves!"

"An' ter think," excitedly exclaimed Mrs. Lemon, as she went from group to group with a plate piled high with cake, "it all come 'bout from that 'scursion."

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